



Beyond the Surface: Unveiling the Complexities of Parent Engagement in Iranian Secondary School Leadership

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores the perceptions of parent engagement in school leadership among parents and principals in Iranian secondary schools, addressing a gap in the literature regarding context-specific understandings of this crucial yet complex concept. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 22 parents and principals in Sanandaj, Iran, selected through purposeful and snowball sampling. Thematic analysis, drawing on Social Capital Theory and Goodall's Parental Engagement Continuum, revealed divergent interpretations of parent engagement, highlighting its undervaluation as a driver for educational quality and a misalignment with its strategic goals. Structural, organizational, socio-cultural, and economic barriers were identified as hindering factors. The study offers contextually relevant recommendations for fostering a more collaborative and empowering approach to parent leadership in Iranian schools, contributing to both policy and practice.

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Introduction

Parent engagement is widely recognized as a key factor influencing children's learning and academic success (Goodall et al., 2011; Salehi, 2021). Its impact extends beyond academic outcomes, affecting children's classroom behaviour, school attendance, completion, and socioemotional development (ARACY, 2016; Axford et al., 2019; Department for Education SA, 2021; Jennings & Bosch, 2011). Indeed, "at-home good parenting" has been found to be even more influential than school quality in shaping primary school achievement (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003). While a robust body of research, primarily from high-income countries, has documented the positive effects of parent engagement (Goodall, 2017; Van Voorhis et al., 2013; McConnell & Kubina, 2014), a deeper understanding of its nuances, particularly its application to school leadership in culturally and systemically diverse contexts like Iran, remains limited (Cashman et al., 2021; Islam, 2017).

In Iran, the "Association of Parents and Teachers" (formerly known as the "Home and School Association"), established in 1947, reflects a historical focus on traditional, school-centric forms of parent involvement, primarily focused on school functions and homework support. However, recent research advocates for a shift towards more active and collaborative parent engagement, particularly in school leadership processes (Cashman et al., 2021; Islam, 2017). This shift aligns with the principles of shared leadership (Spillane, 2006; Harris, 2008), recognizing parents as essential partners in school improvement.

Despite the growing recognition of its importance, defining and implementing parent engagement in school leadership remains challenging. The concept is multifaceted and open to interpretation, influenced by contextual factors, disciplinary perspectives, and stakeholder understandings (Ikhlās, Mokhtar, & Rahman, 2022; Okoko, 2022). This ambiguity can lead to a narrow or superficial understanding of parent engagement, hindering its transformative potential (Baxter & Kilderry, 2022).

This study aims to address this gap by exploring the perceptions of parent engagement in school leadership among parents and principals in Iranian secondary schools. We investigate how they define and understand this concept, the barriers and enablers they perceive, and how their perspectives align with the strategic goals of parent engagement initiatives in Iran. By examining these questions through a qualitative lens, we aim to contribute to a more nuanced and contextually grounded understanding of parent engagement in the Iranian context, leading to practical recommendations for fostering a more collaborative and empowering approach to parent leadership.

Theoretical Framework

Parent engagement in school leadership is a complex and contextually dependent phenomenon shaped by social, cultural, and institutional dynamics. To critically examine this issue in Iranian secondary schools, this study employs an integrated theoretical approach that draws upon Social Capital Theory (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000), Goodall's (2017) Parental Engagement Continuum, and the Family-School Partnerships Framework (Fox & Olsen, 2014). This combined lens enables a deeper analysis of how power relations, cultural expectations, and institutional structures shape parental participation in school leadership, moving beyond traditional, surface-level understandings of engagement.

Social Capital Theory

Social Capital Theory (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000) provides a foundational perspective for understanding how relational networks influence parent engagement. While Coleman (1988) argues that social capital in schools enhances student success through strong home-school ties, Bourdieu (1986) offers a more critical view, emphasizing how unequal access to capital (economic, social, and cultural) perpetuates disparities in educational involvement.

This distinction is particularly relevant in Iran, where social hierarchies and centralized governance shape parental roles. Power asymmetries often relegate parents to peripheral roles in decision-making, reinforcing the traditional school-centric model of engagement (Azaola, 2020; Jeynes, 2018). This study interrogates how these power structures impact parental agency and seeks to uncover whether parent engagement in Iranian schools operates as a mechanism of inclusion or exclusion.

Parental Engagement as a Continuum

Goodall's (2017) Parental Engagement Continuum provides a dynamic model that distinguishes between different levels of parental participation, from passive school involvement to proactive, family-led learning. In many Iranian secondary schools, parent engagement remains confined to Level 1 (Traditional Involvement)—participation in school events and compliance with school directives—rather than Level 2 (Collaborative Decision-Making) or Level 3 (Sustained Family-Led Learning). This study critically evaluates the systemic barriers preventing Iranian parents from progressing along this continuum, questioning whether policy rhetoric around parent-school collaboration translates into genuine leadership opportunities.

Family-School Partnerships

Fox and Olsen's (2014) Family-School Partnerships Framework highlights the potential for parents to move beyond supporting their children at home to actively co-constructing school policies and educational strategies. While Western models of family-school partnerships emphasize mutual accountability and shared governance (Epstein, 2011; Kim & Sheridan, 2015), these concepts face cultural resistance in Iran, where hierarchical leadership structures often marginalize parental voices. This study interrogates whether Iranian schools conceptualize engagement as a collaborative partnership or a mechanism for reinforcing institutional authority.

By synthesizing these theoretical frameworks, this study critically examines how social capital dynamics facilitate or hinder parents' progression along the engagement continuum, particularly toward more active and leadership-oriented roles (Goodall, 2017). Additionally, it interrogates the structural and cultural barriers shaping parental participation, analyzing how power asymmetries, institutional constraints, and limited conceptualizations of engagement—as identified by AITSL (2024)—restrict meaningful parental involvement in school leadership. This research contributes to global discourses on educational leadership and participatory governance (Spillane, 2006; Harris, 2012), offering contextually responsive, policy-driven solutions to foster inclusive, equitable, and collaborative school leadership models not only in Iran but also in comparable educational settings worldwide.

Towards a Critical Model of Parent Leadership in Iran

By integrating these three frameworks, this study moves beyond conventional narratives of parent involvement to critically examine the socio-political dimensions of engagement in Iranian schools. It explores how social capital structures either enable or constrain parent participation in leadership roles; whether parental engagement is framed as a means of empowerment or as a tool for institutional control; and how systemic factors such as school governance, cultural norms, and economic constraints shape parental agency.

In doing so, this research contributes to global discussions on context-sensitive educational leadership (Spillane, 2006; Harris, 2012) and challenges deficit-based perspectives that assume limited parental engagement is due to lack of interest rather than structural exclusion. By critically assessing these theoretical perspectives in the Iranian context, this study offers a nuanced understanding of how parental engagement can move from passive compliance to active co-leadership, ultimately shaping more inclusive, participatory, and equitable school leadership models.

Methodology

This qualitative study employed a descriptive phenomenological approach, as described by Giorgi (2009), to explore the lived experiences of parents and principals regarding parent engagement in school leadership. This approach is particularly suited for understanding the complex and subjective nature of human experiences, allowing for a rich and nuanced exploration of the participants' perspectives.

Participants

The participants in this study were 22 individuals, comprising 11 parents and 11 principals from various secondary schools in Sanandaj, Iran. Purposeful sampling was employed to select participants with diverse backgrounds and experiences related to parent engagement. The parents were selected from schools where their children were enrolled, while the principals were chosen based on their willingness to participate and their experience with parent involvement initiatives. A snowball sampling technique was used to identify additional participants through referrals from existing participants, ensuring a range of perspectives and a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which allowed for an in-depth exploration of the participants' experiences while maintaining consistency in the topics covered. The interview guide was developed based on the literature review and the research questions, focusing on the following areas:

- Participants' definitions and understandings of parent engagement in school leadership.
- Their experiences with parent involvement initiatives in their schools.
- The perceived benefits, challenges, and barriers to effective parent engagement.
- Their perspectives on the alignment of current practices with the strategic goals of parent engagement in Iran.
- Their recommendations for improving parent engagement in school leadership.

Interviews were conducted in Kurdish, the participants' native language, in a private and comfortable setting at the participants' convenience. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participants' consent.

Data Analysis

The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six-step framework outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006):

1. **Familiarization:** The researchers immersed themselves in the data by carefully reading and rereading the transcripts multiple times.
2. **Generating Initial Codes:** Meaningful segments of text were identified and coded using descriptive labels.
3. **Searching for Themes:** Similar codes were grouped together to identify potential themes, paying attention to patterns and relationships in the data.

4. **Reviewing Themes:** The themes were reviewed, refined, and sometimes reorganized to ensure they accurately reflected the data and captured the essence of the participants' experiences.
5. **Defining and Naming Themes:** Clear definitions and concise names were developed for each theme and sub-theme.
6. **Producing the Report:** The findings were organized and presented using the thematic framework as a guiding structure, supported by illustrative quotes from the interviews.

To enhance the rigor and trustworthiness of the analysis, two researchers independently coded a subset of the transcripts, and any discrepancies were resolved through discussion and consensus.

Results

Thematic Analysis of Parent Engagement in Iranian Secondary Schools

Understanding parent engagement in school leadership is pivotal for enhancing educational outcomes and fostering a collaborative school environment. This analysis explores the perceptions, barriers, misalignments, and recommendations related to parent engagement in Iranian secondary schools, supported by direct quotes from both parents and principals.

1. Perceptions and Understandings of Parent Engagement

Divergent Understandings

There exists a significant disparity in how parents and school principals perceive parent engagement. Parents often associate engagement with traditional involvement activities such as attending school events or assisting with fundraising efforts. For instance, one parent stated, "When they say parent engagement, I think they mean coming to school events or helping with fundraising. I don't know much about participating in school leadership" (Interviewee 1). In contrast, principals view parent engagement as a collaborative effort aimed at enhancing the learning environment through active participation in decision-making, sharing expertise, and providing feedback on school policies. A principal elaborated, "Parent engagement is about working together to create the best learning environment for our students. This includes participating in decision-making, sharing their expertise, and providing feedback on school policies" (Interviewee 2).

Undervalued Potential

Many parents defer to the expertise of educators, believing that the school inherently knows what is best for their children. One parent expressed, "The school knows what's best for the students. I trust their expertise and don't feel the need to get involved in leadership decisions" (Interviewee 3). Conversely, principals recognize that parental insights and perspectives are often underutilized but hold the potential to significantly enrich decision-making processes. As one principal noted, "We often underestimate the valuable insights and perspectives that parents can bring to the school. Their involvement can truly enrich our decision-making and improve the quality of education" (Interviewee 4).

2. Challenges and Barriers to Effective Engagement

Structural and Systemic Barriers

The centralized education system in Iran imposes top-down directives from the Ministry of Education, which restricts school autonomy and limits meaningful parent engagement. A parent highlighted, "Everything is decided by the Ministry of Education. We have no say in how the

school is run" (Interviewee 5), while a principal added, "There are so many rules and regulations from the Ministry that limit our flexibility in engaging parents in meaningful ways" (Interviewee 6). Additionally, the absence of a clear legal framework for parent involvement further complicates efforts to foster engagement.

Organizational and Communication Barriers

Ineffective communication channels between schools and parents pose a significant barrier to engagement. Parents often feel that communication is limited to financial or volunteer requests, lacking substantive dialogue about educational matters. One parent remarked, "The school only contacts us when they need money or volunteers. There's no real communication about what's happening in the classroom" (Interviewee 7). Principals acknowledge the need for improved communication methods, stating, "We need to improve our communication channels with parents. We often rely on written notices, which many parents don't read" (Interviewee 8).

Socio-Cultural Barriers

Cultural norms in Iran contribute to a hierarchical perception of the educational environment, where parents may feel it is not their place to question teachers or principals. A parent shared, "It's not our place to question the teachers or the principal. They are the experts" (Interviewee 9), while a principal emphasized the necessity of creating a more inclusive and welcoming environment: "We need to create a more open and welcoming environment for parents. Some parents are hesitant to participate because they feel intimidated by the school hierarchy" (Interviewee 10).

Economic and Personal Constraints

Economic hardships and personal time constraints significantly hinder parents' ability to engage with their children's schools. One parent explained, "I work long hours to support my family. I don't have the time or the energy to get involved in school activities" (Interviewee 11), and another highlighted financial struggles: "Many of our parents struggle financially. It's difficult for them to attend meetings or contribute financially to the school" (Interviewee 12).

3. Misalignment with Strategic Goals

Deviation from Initial Aims

There is a noticeable gap between the intended goals of parent engagement initiatives and their actual implementation. Parents have observed unfulfilled promises, such as the establishment of parent councils that never materialize. For example, a parent noted, "They promised to create a parent council, but nothing ever happened" (Interviewee 13). Similarly, principals have struggled to implement parent engagement policies due to resource and support limitations: "We haven't been able to fully implement the parent engagement policies outlined by the Ministry due to lack of resources and support" (Interviewee 14).

4. Recommendations for Enhancing Engagement

Enhancing Communication

Improving communication between schools and parents is essential for fostering engagement. Parents advocate for more regular updates through newsletters, emails, or online platforms. One parent suggested, "We need more regular communication from the school, like newsletters or emails, to keep us informed about what's going on" (Interviewee 15).

Empowering Parents

Empowering parents by providing opportunities to share their expertise and participate in decision-making can enhance their engagement. A parent expressed interest in contributing through structured programs: "I would love to share my expertise with the school, maybe through a parent committee or a mentoring program" (Interviewee 16).

Addressing Cultural Norms

Creating a culture of partnership between schools and parents is crucial. Principals believe that valuing parent perspectives and fostering collaborative environments can mitigate socio-cultural barriers. One principal stated, "We need to create a culture of partnership between the school and parents, where we value their perspectives and work together to support our students" (Interviewee 17).

Providing Support

Offering practical support can alleviate economic and personal constraints that hinder parent engagement. For example, one parent suggested, "The school could offer childcare during meetings or events. That would make it easier for working parents to participate" (Interviewee 18). Additionally, providing transportation assistance and flexible meeting times can further support parents' involvement.

Table 1: Thematic Analysis of Parent Engagement in Iranian Secondary Schools

Theme	Sub-Theme	Illustrative Quotes
Perceptions and Understandings	Divergent Understandings	"When they say parent engagement, I think they mean coming to school events or helping with fundraising. I don't know much about participating in school leadership." (Interviewee 1) "Parent engagement is about working together to create the best learning environment for our students. This includes participating in decision-making, sharing their expertise, and providing feedback on school policies." (Interviewee 2)
	Undervalued Potential	"The school knows what's best for the students. I trust their expertise and don't feel the need to get involved in leadership decisions." (Interviewee 3) "We often underestimate the valuable insights and perspectives that parents can bring to the school. Their involvement can truly enrich our decision-making and improve the quality of education." (Interviewee 4)
Challenges and Barriers	Structural Barriers	"Everything is decided by the Ministry of Education. We have no say in how the school is run." (Interviewee 5) "There are so many rules and regulations from the Ministry that limit our flexibility in engaging parents in meaningful ways." (Interviewee 6)
	Organizational Barriers	"The school only contacts us when they need money or volunteers. There's no real communication about what's happening in the classroom." (Interviewee 7) "We need to improve our communication channels with parents. We often rely on written notices, which many parents don't read." (Interviewee 8)
	Socio-Cultural Barriers	"It's not our place to question the teachers or the principal. They are the experts." (Interviewee 9) "We need to create a more open and welcoming environment for parents. Some parents are hesitant to participate because they feel intimidated by the school hierarchy." (Interviewee 10)
	Economic Barriers	"I work long hours to support my family. I don't have the time or the energy to get involved in school activities." (Interviewee 11)

		11) "Many of our parents struggle financially. It's difficult for them to attend meetings or contribute financially to the school." (Interviewee 12)
Misalignment with Strategic Goals	Deviation from Initial Aims	"They promised to create a parent council, but nothing ever happened." (Interviewee 13) "We haven't been able to fully implement the parent engagement policies outlined by the Ministry due to lack of resources and support." (Interviewee 14)
Recommendations for Enhancing Engagement	Enhancing Communication	"We need more regular communication from the school, like newsletters or emails, to keep us informed about what's going on." (Interviewee 15)
	Empowering Parents	"I would love to share my expertise with the school, maybe through a parent committee or a mentoring program." (Interviewee 16)
	Addressing Cultural Norms	"We need to create a culture of partnership between the school and parents, where we value their perspectives and work together to support our students." (Interviewee 17)
	Providing Support	"The school could offer childcare during meetings or events. That would make it easier for working parents to participate." (Interviewee 18)

As shown in Table 1, this integrated thematic analysis provides a comprehensive overview of the current state of parent engagement in Iranian secondary schools, highlighting key areas for improvement and offering actionable recommendations based on participant insights. The thematic analysis reveals that while there is a foundational recognition of the importance of parent engagement in school leadership, various perceptions, structural barriers, socio-cultural norms, and economic constraints impede effective participation. Addressing these challenges through enhanced communication, empowerment initiatives, cultural shifts, and practical support can significantly improve parental involvement. These strategies not only align with the original aims of fostering collaborative school environments but also ensure that parent engagement contributes meaningfully to the leadership and quality of education in Iranian secondary schools.

Discussion

This study offers a nuanced understanding of parent engagement in Iranian secondary school leadership, exposing both aspirations for meaningful involvement and significant challenges hindering its realization. Our findings, reflecting the experiences of parents and principals, both resonate with and critically extend existing literature on parent engagement, particularly concerning the limitations of dominant Western models in non-Western contexts.

The prevalence of reductionist views of parent engagement, often equated with fundraising or event attendance (Interviewee 1, Interviewee 3), aligns with observations in other contexts (Gülcan & Durán, 2018; Ikhlas, Mokhtar, & Rahman, 2022; Matshidze et al., 2015; Okoko, 2022; Othman et al., 2013). This reflects a narrow, instrumental understanding of parent involvement, neglecting the potential for parents to contribute diverse forms of social capital beyond the purely economic (Claridge, 2021; Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000). Indeed, as

Bourdieu (1986) suggests, a sole focus on economic contributions can mask underlying power dynamics and reinforce existing inequalities.

The barriers identified in our study further illuminate the complex interplay of systemic, organizational, cultural, and economic factors shaping parent engagement. The centralized nature of the Iranian education system and the lack of a clear legal framework, as noted by participants (Interviewee 2, Interviewee 5, Interviewee 6) resonate with findings from Uganda (Mugumya, Mwesigye, & Ahimbisibwe, 2023) and underscore the need for policy-level changes to create supportive structures for parent leadership. Organizational barriers, including ineffective communication (Interviewee 1, Interviewee 7, Interviewee 8) and negative attitudes from school staff, (Interviewee 2) echo challenges identified by Woodrow et al. (2016) in their Australian study. Creating a welcoming and inclusive school climate, as advocated by participants (Interviewee 6, Interviewee 10), is crucial for fostering trust and open dialogue, particularly for families from marginalized backgrounds (Engeström, 1987; Vygotsky, 1978). Moreover, as AITSL (2024) emphasizes, recognizing and addressing the diverse needs of families from vulnerable communities is paramount.

Critically, this study reveals the limitations of Goodall's (2017) Parental Engagement Continuum in the Iranian context, as systemic constraints impede parents' progression beyond Level 1 (Traditional Involvement). This finding suggests the need for culturally sensitive adaptations of the continuum to account for the specific socio-political and economic realities shaping parent engagement in Iran.

Our analysis also questions the potential for the Family-School Partnerships Framework (Fox & Olsen, 2014) to translate into genuine power-sharing in Iranian schools. Hierarchical decision-making, coupled with rigid state oversight, may limit authentic parent-teacher collaboration beyond consultative roles. The findings challenge deficit-based assumptions attributing low parental involvement to disinterest, instead highlighting systemic and policy-level barriers effectively excluding parents from substantive educational leadership processes, power dynamics amplified in the Global South (Roy, 2023). These complex and multifaceted barriers warrant the establishment of a clearly defined agenda that enables greater equity.

In highlighting these complexities, this study draws attention to the importance of culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2010) and transformative leadership approaches (Shields, 2010) in empowering Iranian parents to become active co-constructors of their children's education.

Conclusion

This study has illuminated the multifaceted nature of parent engagement in Iranian secondary school leadership, revealing both aspirations for meaningful involvement and significant challenges demanding a context-sensitive approach. Our findings underscore the critical need for a paradigm shift toward a more collaborative and empowering model of parent leadership grounded in shared responsibility, trust, and mutual respect.

By integrating Social Capital Theory (Bourdieu, 1986), Goodall's Parental Engagement Continuum (2017), and the Family-School Partnerships Framework (Fox & Olsen, 2014), this research provides a comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics at play within the Iranian context. Policymakers must prioritize establishing clear legal frameworks, allocating resources to support parent engagement initiatives, and addressing the systemic barriers identified in this study. School leaders, in turn, must cultivate a positive school climate, embrace shared leadership models, and implement effective communication strategies to foster meaningful parent participation in decision-making.

Ultimately, recognizing parents as valuable assets and partners in school leadership can foster more effective, equitable, and inclusive schools that nurture the success of all students. This study serves as a call to action for policymakers, school leaders, and researchers to collaborate in fostering a transformative approach to parent engagement in Iranian education by taking a holistic stance toward a more comprehensive set of outcomes.

align with best practices highlighted in the AITSL (2024) and resonate with research on effective parent engagement strategies globally (Axford et al., 2019; EFL, 2019; Heinrichs, 2018). By prioritizing awareness-raising, skill development, and open communication, schools can create a more collaborative and empowering environment for parent leadership.

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